

Towards “Justainability”: A Colored Perspective on the Green Economy

April 22, 2010 | Filed under: Earth Day, Environmental, Featured | Posted by: Kirwan Institute

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Green is “in” and here to stay. Not even the most powerful political and economic players can ignore the risks of climate change. In fact, the largest companies in the world have positioned themselves as our saviors in ushering in the green economy. But the question is, how much change does green really demand? Can sustainability efforts truly succeed without addressing racial and economic injustice?

Can the climate be stabilized without a fundamental transformation of the global economy? Can some of us go green while billions go hungry? Can the environment be made healthy only for those who can afford it, while people of color and the poor continue to live in degraded conditions? We say “no” to all of the above.

Coming from the environmental justice (EJ) movement, we have long realized that achieving racial and economic justice is not possible without fixing the unsustainable and inequitable economy. That’s because our communities have been the “dumping grounds” for all kinds of environmental problems. In conversation with other EJ movement allies and leaders, we realized that our local actions really do add up to a global vision. Collectively, we have been advancing a vision in which **sustainability and justice – “justainability” – must be simultaneous results; one simply cannot happen without the other.**

We lay out this vision in the recently released report **Environmental Justice and the Green Economy: A Vision Statement and Case Studies for Just and Sustainable Solutions.** [Download in both English and Spanish at <http://ejstimulus.wordpress.com/>.] This report highlights a number of grassroots environmental justice successes that are leading the way toward **justainability**. We find that grassroots struggles against environmental racism and injustice are laying the foundations for a green and equitable economy.

For example, in the San Diego area, a predominantly Latino community defeated the expansion of a fossil fuel power plant by advancing its own proposals for renewable energy and energy efficiency. In a historically black neighborhood of Miami, tenants who won their battle to remain in a renovated public housing complex are now working rebuild to green standards.

In Navajo land, youth propelled a successful campaign to pass the Navajo Nation’s first green jobs act, which will support economic development based on traditional and sustainable practices. In Kentucky’s coal region, communities are working to transform their economies to clean energy, such as wind turbines on mountains, instead of removing mountains to mine more coal. The report also profiles cases in Chicago, Los Angeles, Richmond California, and New York City. Each of these cases points to the need for decision makers to:

1. Strive for full democratic participation.
2. Build capacity for a truly sustainable infrastructure and green economy.
3. Create and share “green” wealth.

We have been striving towards these principles in our efforts in the Boston area with Alternatives for Community & Environment (ACE, www.ace-ej.org). Based in Roxbury, a low-income community of color, ACE was founded in 1993 and inspired by the then-blossoming EJ movement. Over the past 17 years, we have supported successful campaigns to defeat the siting of asphalt plants, power plants, and highway off-ramps. We have won the conversion of our diesel transit buses to cleaner alternatives and helped clean up and redevelop contaminated brownfields. Along the way, we have inspired and nurtured thousands of youth and adult leaders and built a membership of over 600.

Despite our EJ roots and strong alliances with other racial and economic justice groups in the region, it has taken conscious effort over the past few years to develop and integrate **justainability** into our work. We started with our youth, who had been campaigning for summer jobs funding as a way to address escalating violence, which they defined as a key environmental injustice.

We asked ourselves whether we were advocating for any job, or whether we had something to say about what kind of economic opportunities we wanted for young people. To answer that question, we had to define for ourselves what we meant by a green economy. We had to understand climate change and how it was affecting our communities. Even though our EJ approach set us up for that analysis, we had to develop a vision that clearly articulated what **justainability** meant to our community.

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Our goal is to revolutionize thought, communication and activism related to race, gender and equality. Race-Talk has recruited more than 30 extraordinary authors, advocates, social justice leaders, journalists and researchers who graciously volunteered their expertise, their passion and time to deliberately discuss race, gender and equity issues in the US and globally.

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Most of all, we found that we had to create our own frame. When we asked our youth leaders who was responsible for climate change, their initial response was “we are.” They had internalized the mainstream message that it is individual overconsumption and lifestyle that is driving the environmental crisis. No doubt that we all contribute to environmental destruction and climate change, but there are vast and significant differences between how much people contribute to *and* benefit from these practices.

While it is more common to hear that the US, with less than 5% of the world’s population, uses more than 25% of the world’s fossil fuels, we hear very little about the significant differences between the wealthy and the poor and working classes within the US. For example, the average suburban household in Greater Boston buys 85% more gas and uses 20% more electricity than city households. Moreover, it is the world’s wealthy who have benefited the most from unsustainable economic practices. Six of the ten largest corporations in the world (by gross revenue) in 2007 were oil companies; another three were auto companies. In 2007, Exxon-Mobil had the greatest profit of any corporation on Earth.

Our own frame shift led to getting serious about putting ourselves at the forefront of the new green economy. We knew that if we didn’t bring our own perspective and demands, no one else would, and we would continue to see business as usual. So in 2008, ACE helped launch a new Massachusetts Green Justice Coalition as part of Community Labor United, an alliance of community organizing groups and unions (see <http://massclu.org/green-justice-campaign>). This coalition is founded on three principles:

1. Greening is not only our responsibility, it is our right.

Resources for greening must be accessible to all if we are to stabilize our climate.

2. A sustainable economy must be as equitable as it is green.

We must repair economic inequalities by promoting family-sustaining green jobs, career pathways, and local and community-owned businesses.

3. Lower income communities and communities of color that have been overburdened by the dirty fossil fuel economy must be at the forefront of the green wave.

In 2009, this coalition of over 40 groups achieved a major victory with the passage of the state’s three-year energy efficiency plans, which will invest \$1.4 billion and create thousands of jobs. We won the commitment to pilot community-based initiatives that include door-to-door outreach and distributing the work to responsible contractors committed to training and hiring local workers at a decent wage.

While fighting the policy battles, we have also gotten serious about building our own businesses to actively create the green economy that we want. In partnership with three other community groups, we have been developing a community and worker-owned energy efficiency services company. We envision a business that will employ 20-25 workers that will serve our own communities and be a vehicle for keeping green wealth in the community. We have completed a feasibility study and hired a start-up manager.

We know that our chances of success in the current market economy are slim. Most businesses fail. On the policy front, we know that with our recent victory, the multi-year work of implementation has just begun. However, we are finding that these efforts are engaging our organizations and leaders for the long term. We do have a dream that is worth sacrificing for and not just something to get angry about.

We know we cannot continue business as usual. We cannot allow ourselves to remain trapped in the “American Dream” of (over) consuming our way to happiness. We must build our democratic capacity to ensure that public decisions are guided by and accountable to all communities, particularly to those that have historically been most impacted by environmental degradation and economic marginalization. Perhaps hardest of all, we must address the extreme wealth inequalities that only fuel the unsustainability of our current economy.

The sharing of new green wealth must be a fundamental part of the green economy. Any green vision in which the majority of the world’s people remain in poverty and lack basic human needs is neither stable, secure, nor, in the long run, sustainable. As long as the costs of unsustainability remain hidden or fall disproportionately on historically marginalized communities while accruing benefit to a small minority, we will continue to experience “business as usual.” As we move forward we must continue to work locally and network nationally and internationally with our partners to ensure that justice and sustainability are intertwined inextricably as **justainability**.

***Kalila Barnett** is ACE’s Executive Director. She was previously a Senior Organizer at Community Labor United and served on ACE’s Board of Directors for 5 years. She is a Roxbury native and lifelong resident of Boston. Kalila graduated from Bates College in 2001 with a degree in American Studies and Spanish. She has also worked at Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation and Madison Park Development Corporation, organizing around community development issues and affordable housing in the Roxbury and Jamaica Plain area. Kalila was also the field director for a local city council campaign in 2005.*

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